

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY V.D. PUBLICITY *

BY

HELEN MACGREGOR

London

It was fortunate for E. Johnson, proprietor of the *British Gazette and Sunday Monitor*, that, in the late eighteenth century, it was not a penal offence, as it has been since November, 1917, to advertise to the lay public remedies for the treatment of venereal disease. In the files of this newspaper for the years 1789, 1790, 1791, and 1792, there appeared, week after week, among the advertisements for boarding-schools, dancing-lessons, toothache-cures, and so on, the names of "cures" for V.D. It is odd to think that just over a hundred years later, in 1909, Brieux's play *Les Avariés* should have been banned because the subject of venereal disease was taboo!

The advertisement for Dr. Arnold's Pills, which were to be bought for 10s. 6d. and one guinea a bottle at the doctor's house, 7, Gough Square, Fleet Street, read thus:

Though mild and innocent in their nature they have been found by long experience to be an invaluable remedy for the V.D. and have effected a cure where salivation would fail.

The pills were prepared:

... for those who have injured themselves by intemperance, and young people who feel in the prime of life the dreadful effects of a secret vice too frequent among the youth of both sexes.

Another advertisement informed the reader that Mr. Spilsbury, junior, had appointed Mr. Jolly, chemist, King Street, Carnaby Market, "to vend for him his valuable medicines", which included his "alterative drops for Venereal complaints". These could also be obtained at Spilsbury's dispensary in Soho.

At Randalls, the Royal Exchange, was to be bought, at 5s. 5d. and 10s. 6d. a bottle, "Spécifique Unique", a V.D. cure which was offered "by a professional man whose new discovery offers a certain cure for gonorrhea within one week". To prove that "to benefit mankind" was his main motive, "any pauper recommended by a respectable inhabitant will have the cure gratis".

"Gleets" could be cured, the advertiser claimed, by "Balsam of Life", at 6s. 3d. a box, for those whose constitutions were debilitated by "dissipated pleasures, the immoderate use of tea, etc.". As an antidote to mercury, which was used in the treatment

of venereal disease, there was "Hunter's Restorative Balm" which was advertised as "a restorative medicine for life and health, for recovering lost vigour, recruiting impaired strength, and giving new life and vigour to debilitated old age and emaciated youth". Another antidote to "the dreadful consequences of mercurials" was Mr. Beer's "Grand Arcanum". Dr. Blagrove's "Golden Spirits" were advertised for the cure of eruptions "due to intemperate living".

One of the most widely advertised cures was Leake's "Pilula Salutaris", more commonly known as "Leake's Pills". These were prepared and sold by Thomas Taylor, a member of the Corporation of Surgeons, at 9, New Bridge Street. They cost 2s. 9d. a box, and were, according to the advertisements:

... justly famous for curing, in all its stages, the Venereal Disease. One small pill is a dose. One box in a recent case brings speedy recovery. It will effect a cure when salivation and other methods all avail nothing.

Forty thousand of both sexes were reputed to have been cured in 8 years.

The advertisement for Leake's Pills in the issue of the *British Gazette and Sunday Monitor* for March 19, 1792, contained a letter to Thomas Taylor from Richard Edwards, clerk of St. Michael's Church, Bristol, witnessed by John Morris. This told of a mariner living in Church Lane in that parish, who was a free burgess, and had contracted V.D. at Bordeaux. The first effects were soon removed by medicine. But, soon, alarming symptoms appeared. He had excruciating pains in his head. He lost his hair, his sight, and his hearing. He had such pains in his legs that he could not walk, sit, or lie, without being in agony. There were swellings inside each thigh. He seemed to be dying when Richard Edwards went to visit him, but Edwards remembered reading, in the *Bristol Mercury*, of the cure of one, James Joshua Jones, by Leake's Patent Pills.

The dying man agreed to try the pills, and within a fortnight, he could hear, see, and walk; the swellings on his thighs soon disappeared, and before long, he was expected to be back at sea. He had begged Edwards to write to surgeon Taylor to "offer thanks for such an amazing restoration to health from the brink of the grave".

* Received for publication December 3, 1954.

The Leake whose name was associated with these pills was not John Leake, the man midwife who died in 1792, but Walter Leake, a journeyman bookbinder, who took out a patent for the pills taking advantage of the fact that he bore the same surname as the doctor. In 1767, Dr. John Leake had published a "Dissertation on the Properties and Efficacy of the Lisbon Diet Drink and its Extract in the cure of Venereal Disease", a discreditable production in which the composition of the remedy is kept a secret while its efficacy in more than thirty diseases is maintained.*

This "Dissertation" was still being advertised, more than 20 years later, in the *British Gazette and Sunday Monitor*, as a handbook telling how to cure V.D., but sales of the book had been badly affected by the sale of Walter Leake's pills which were said to obtain the same results as the Lisbon Diet Drink. In the meantime Dr. John Leake had bought a piece of land near the Surrey end of Westminster Bridge, and persuaded subscribers to build a Lying-In Hospital there, and appoint him first physician.

Another book advertised in this newspaper was "Salivation Exploded or a Practical Essay on Venereal Disease fully demonstrating the inefficacy of Salivation and recommending an approved Succedaneum which gives a different method of preventing Infection" (2s.).

Books, pills, and balsams, would benefit only the literate, or well-to-do.

For the poor there was the Lock Hospital, Grosvenor Place, but only comparatively few could be treated there. In "London and its Environs" (1761), it is stated that between the opening on January 31, 1747, to March 10, 1753, 1,740 in-patients had been discharged as cured, and there were also a few out-patients. Admission to the Lock Hospital was not easily gained; according to the rules, no patient could be accepted without a recommendation in writing signed by a Governor, or one of the weekly committee. To be a Governor, a gentleman had to give a minimum annual subscription of £5. Every Saturday, a committee of at least five met at the hospital at 10 a.m. to admit and discharge patients, adjust the weekly accounts, receive the reports of the visitors, and examine the affairs of the house. Two of the contributors were appointed weekly by the committee to conduct a daily examination of the behaviour of the patients and nurses. All recommendations for admission had to be received on a Saturday morning. Every patient had to submit to the rules of the hospital, on pain of being discharged for irregularity, after

which he could never again be received "on any recommendation whatsoever". No Governor could have more than one patient in the hospital at any one time, and preference was given to patients recommended by "those who subscribe the largest sums", but an exception was made in the case of "several married women, children, and infants", who were often "almost naked, penniless and starving". In the first 6 years over sixty children between the ages of 2 and 12 were treated as priority cases because:

They became infected from ways little suspected by the generality of mankind, from the absurd opinion, imbibed by the lower class, both males and females, that by communicating this loathsome disease to one they found, they will get rid of it themselves; and from this principle, which is contradicted by human experience, the most horrible acts of barbarity have frequently been committed on poor little infants, and thus these vile wretches have entailed the most dreadful disease on these innocent infants without affording the least relief to themselves. This the Governors have thought their duty to publish in order, as much as possible, to root out among mankind an opinion at once so base, so false, and productive of such cruelty.

As late as 1908, when Shaw wrote his preface to "Getting Married", he mentioned that forcing contagion on another person by act of violence was "still punished unmercifully by an extreme term of penal servitude when it occurs, as it sometimes does, through the hideous countryside superstition that it effects a cure when the victim is a virgin".

In 1761 there was also a Lock Hospital for venereal disease in Kent Street, Southwark; it was a former leper hospital, belonging to St. Bartholomew's. There could not have been room for many patients there, because it is described as "a small neat edifice". Another hospital, The Lock, in Kingsland, at that time "a hamlet of the parish of Islington", had also been a leper hospital before St. Bartholomew's and St. Thomas's appropriated it to the cure of venereal disease. In this instance the "edifice" was a plain modern brick building without ornamental decorations. It is large, and proper for the use to which it is applied, and on the end of it is a dial which has the following suitable motto: "POST VOLUPTATEM MISERICORDIA". Though no letter from a governor was required for St. Bartholomew's patients, there was a real deterrent to the admission of the poor, for they had to deposit, or give security for, the payment of a guinea in case of death, for the funeral. Thus, "some of the poorest and most miserable and consequently the most proper objects" were "unhappily excluded from reaping the benefit they might otherwise receive".

*D.N.B.